

April 27, 2006

**Statement of Specialist Brandy Wynette Taylor
U.S. Army Reserve
296th Transportation Company**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

My name is Brandy Taylor. I am a former Army Reserve Specialist with the 296th Transportation Company, based in Brookhaven, Mississippi. Thank you for the opportunity to take part in this hearing to share my experiences with Army pay and debt problems. It is my hope that sharing my experiences will help the Congress and the Army make needed improvements so that other soldiers will not experience similar problems.

Combat Assignment and Injury

I entered on duty with the Army Reserve in July 2001 as a Food Service Specialist with training in meal planning and preparation. My unit received orders to go to Iraq on January 16, 2003. On February 18, 2003, we left the United States for the Middle East. Upon arriving in Iraq, I was assigned to drive a 5-ton supply truck and deliver Meals Ready to Eat (MREs) in a war zone. I wasn't doing much cooking.

It was very dangerous to enter Baghdad from the south so we were told to head north, past the city, and then turn south and drive into Baghdad from the north. On March 23, 2003, my unit was attacked on the way into Baghdad. During the attack, I was wounded by mortar fire, which left shrapnel imbedded in my right knee. Fortunately, I was the only soldier hurt.

I was first treated at local field hospitals, undergoing two surgical procedures there. Once I was stabilized, I was sent to Kuwait where I had two more surgical procedures. From Kuwait, I traveled to Spain where I underwent two additional surgical procedures. None of the surgical procedures were successful. The military medical staffs were unable to remove the shrapnel from my knee. I was then sent to Germany and from there I was transferred to a military hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. Shortly thereafter, I was sent to a military hospital at Keesler Air Force Base (AFB), in Biloxi, Mississippi. I arrived at Keesler AFB around April 8, 2003.

**Loss of Visibility on Army Rolls
During Medical Treatment**

Upon my arrival at Keesler AFB in April 2003, I made several attempts to contact my unit to let them know my status and location and advise them that I was being treated for my combat injury. I left messages on several occasions for my unit Sergeant at the two

locations I had for him in Hattiesburg, Mississippi and Brookhaven, Mississippi. However, months went by and there was no response.

While at Keesler AFB, I was told that I would require physical therapy to rehabilitate my knee. Colonel Nicholls, a medical doctor on staff at the Keesler AFB Hospital's Orthopedic Center, gave me two treatment options. The first option was to receive rehab treatment at the Keesler medical facility. However, because there were no Army facilities in the area and since I was not a member of the Air Force, I was told that I would have to rent an apartment nearby and pay for it myself. The other option was to go home to Leakesville, Mississippi, and commute to a rehab center near my home. Given the difference in cost, this was an easy decision.

On approximately April 10, 2003, I went home to begin my rehab sessions at Encore Rehabilitation, Inc. Dr. Nicholls made the arrangements with Encore and told me to "go home and get well." I was required to travel to the Keesler AFB Orthopedic Center (a two-hour round trip) every two weeks to be examined by Dr. Nicholls. I received rehab treatment in this fashion until July 2003, when Dr. Nicholls cleared me, noting that I had successfully completed my rehabilitation. During this period, I considered myself a member of the Army Reserve. I was getting paid and my checks were automatically deposited in my bank account. The only difference was that my pay was no longer tax exempt because I was back in the United States and no longer serving in a combat zone.

About this same time in July 2003, my unit Sergeant called to say he had been looking for me. I responded that I had been looking for him, too! My Admin Officer told me to report to Fort Stewart, Georgia, and to remain there until my unit returned from Iraq and was demobilized. I did as ordered and was placed in Medical Hold status at Fort Stewart. On November 17, 2003, I was medically discharged from the Army Reserve.

Struggle to Resolve AWOL Status and Military Debt

After my separation, the pay checks that I received while being treated at the Encore Rehab Center in my hometown and the Army Reserve enlistment bonus I received when I joined the Army Reserve in 2001 became issues of interest to DFAS with regard to military debt. I first became aware that I had military debt when I was contacted by a collection agent in January 2004. The collection agent told me that I owed the government money related to being paid for a period of time that was not worked, indicating that my unit had listed me as absent without leave (AWOL). Because of the AWOL report, my unit said I had to repay \$975 of my enlistment bonus for time not served. This debt was the result of my unit's failure to track my status after I was medically evacuated and placed in the Medical Hold process. In addition to the AWOL debt, I also learned that I had a \$600 debt related to overpayment of hardship duty pay. I did not agree with these debts because they were not my fault. Together the two debts totaled \$1,575.

Although these debts were not my fault, I struggled for well over two years to resolve them and encountered harassment by a collection agency and problems with my credit

report. When I was first contacted by the collection agent, I told him that I was never AWOL. I explained that I was receiving supervised rehabilitation for my war injury during the period in question. The collection agent told me to contact my unit and have them complete and submit the necessary paperwork to waive the debt. When I contacted my unit Admin Officer in Brookhaven, Mississippi, she told me that the unit Sergeant had listed me as AWOL during my outpatient rehabilitation treatment in 2003.

When I explained that I was receiving rehab treatment under military supervision, the Admin Officer said that the Sergeant had really messed up my paperwork. My unit Admin Officer said she would correct this problem and I traveled to Brookhaven on two occasions to meet with her and fill out the paperwork and have the debt waived. Although my Admin Officer told me that she would take care of everything, I received another call from the collection agent in late 2004. The collection agent asked about the status of my debt waiver paperwork. I told him it was being handled by my unit Admin Officer. However, when I contacted the Admin Officer to check on the status, she was never in and she never returned my calls. As it turned out, the Admin Officer was away at school.

Although the collection agent was cooperative at first, he soon became very mean and nasty. He hounded me for months, telling me that I owed the government money because I had been AWOL and was still getting paid. I explained again that I was never AWOL but was in fact being treated for a combat related injury at an approved rehabilitation center in Leakesville, Mississippi. I explained this to the collection agent many times, but he refused to listen.

Because I was unable to get any support from my unit, in February 2005 I had to locate and compile all of the records related to the period of my rehab treatment by myself and fax them to the collection agent. I called him to confirm that he had received the material and he confirmed that he had. The collection agent told me that I would hear from DFAS in a few months; however, DFAS never contacted me. Then, in November 2005, I received a check for about \$576 related to the release of my 2004 income tax refund which had been withheld under the Treasury Offset Program to cover part of my military debt. At this point, I assumed all of my debt issues had been cleared.

Hardship Posed by Military Debt

I experienced significant frustration and financial difficulty during my 2-1/2 year struggle to resolve my military debt. I had planned to use my 2004 income tax refund to pay off a bill payer loan I had obtained when I separated from the service. When I could not pay off this loan, it caused other problems. I had to quit attending college where I was studying computer science in order to work more hours and increase my income to pay my bills. In November 2005, when I attempted to obtain a \$500 loan to pay off my credit card balance, my loan application was denied because my credit report showed an outstanding military debt, which was listed as DFAS debt. When Christmas came, I had no money. Previously, I had always paid my bills on time. Now I had bills that I could not pay and I had to decide which bills I could pay and which bills I would pay late. In

January 2006, I again applied for a loan and it was denied for the same reason—DFAS debt.

Although DFAS recalled my reported debt of \$1,575 (including a past due debt of \$1,079) from the major credit bureaus on two separate occasions, the military debt appeared on my credit report again at the end of March 2006. I understand that this was the result of errors made by both DFAS and the credit bureau. However, the Army's referral of my debt to the major credit bureaus in the first place created the opportunity for these errors to occur. The bottom line was that I still could not get a loan to pay off my credit card balance and as a result, I incurred credit card interest charges, which are quite high. The military was quick to pursue me for debts that were their mistakes, and they were extremely slow in correcting their errors, resulting in significant stress and additional cost and effort to me.

Concluding Remarks

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you again for the opportunity to share my military debt experience with you. In reflecting on my experience, I want to note that the Army awarded me a Purple Heart for my combat injury, the Mayor of Leakesville gave me the key to my hometown, and here was this terrible man from the collection agency hounding me and making me feel like I was a criminal. I was a 24 year-old war hero and should not have had to deal with this kind of stuff. It is my faith in God keeps me going. I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.